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SUBJECT: POLICE DETAIN SEVEN CATHOLICS INVOLVED IN PROTESTS OVER
PROPERTY IN HANOI

REF: A) HANOI 980 B) HANOI 446 C) HANOI 160

Summary -----

¶1. (SBU) Local police on August 28 arrested four individuals in connection with ongoing Catholic land-dispute demonstrations in Hanoi's Thai Ha parish; another three were later taken into custody after they protested the arrests. The state-controlled press has continued a daily drumbeat of criticism, accusing the Catholics of unlawful acts. Thai Ha parish priests told us that they are angry about the arrests and, in particular, the negative press coverage. Neither side appears willing to compromise on the issue of who owns the land near the parish, and the church doesn't seem willing to end its demonstrations anytime soon. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On August 28, Poloff visited Thai Ha parish to view the site and to speak with parish priests and protestors involved in this most recent round of demonstrations involving disputed land (reftels).

Story Behind the Story -----

¶3. (SBU) The Thai Ha Church is one of the larger Catholic churches in Hanoi and belongs to the Redemptorist religious order. According to parish priests, the government confiscated all 15 acres of church-owned land in 1962, except for the property where the actual church building was located. (The priests dispute a government claim that control of the property had been signed over in 1961, insisting that the signed documents were simply a survey.) The government converted some of the monastery buildings into a large hospital, while the remaining parcels of land were given to state-owned enterprises (SOEs). In 2007, the parish built a new prayer chapel on an adjoining property with the tacit blessing of the SOEs, but without direct government approval. Local authorities have now threatened to take back the land where the new chapel and home are located arguing that they never gave approval. The main piece of land in dispute is separated from the rest of the church property by the hospital and is about a block away from the main church and the new prayer chapel.

¶4. (SBU) The protests began in January (Ref C) after one of the SOEs began construction on the disputed site. The protests quieted down during the Tet Holiday while the church awaited the decision of municipal leaders regarding returning the land, but resumed in April after the city government refused the Thai Ha church's claim (Ref B). Finally, after hearing rumors that the SOEs had begun selling it to individuals for housing development, the priests decided to restart the demonstrations again on August 14 (Ref A). In the most recent round of protests, the demonstrators destroyed a small brick wall (about 2-3 feet tall) on the side of the property adjacent to the street.

Protests Continue and Talking with Demonstrators -----

15. (SBU) Since the restart of the demonstrations, parish priests have led twice-daily prayer sessions at the disputed site, which attract on average more than 250 people, sometimes more. Upon visiting the site, we saw an orderly group of over 100 individuals, primarily women and ethnic minorities, praying and singing under two awnings set up by the demonstrators to shield them from the hot sun.

In the middle of the property the church has put together a small makeshift altar with a statue of the Virgin Mary, a cross, incense burners, candles and other pictures of the Virgin Mary. Since the protestors tore down the small brick wall on August 15 there is no barrier to enter the property. On the opposite end of the property, we saw 30 policemen sitting under an awning observing the protestors. We spoke with several of the demonstrators who claimed to have had family members or friends detained for questioning on August 15. They said they had not heard from these individuals since being detained. Some of the protestors from outside Hanoi claimed to have heard about the protest through the news and decided to travel to the site in order to support their Catholic brothers and sisters in Hanoi.

Four Arrests + Three More = 7

16. (SBU) The priests informed us that they had just learned that the government had on August 27 decided to open a criminal investigation into the alleged destruction of property and disturbing the peace. They said that Mr. Le Quang Kien, 63, had been detained by police for questioning on the morning of August 28.

Mr. Le was later formally arrested and the police also sought to question Mr. Le's wife, Mrs. Le Thi Hoi, 61, but she refused to leave her home. She called the parish priests to ask for assistance. The parish sent two priests and two other members of

HANOI 00001007 002 OF 002

the parish to assist Mrs. Le. During our meeting, the parish priests received several phone calls from the Le home saying she had too been arrested. The priests said that they knew of two other individuals, including a member of the Hmong minority, who had been detained for questioning that morning as well. At a press conference later in the afternoon, the Hanoi Chief of Police and Vice Chair of the Hanoi People's Committee announced that an additional three individuals had been taken into custody after they joined demonstrations outside the police station where the four were being held.

17. (SBU) The priests expressed anger that the government had turned a civil dispute over who owned the land into a criminal issue. The priests also affirmed that the ten priests at the Thai Ha parish stand ready to bear responsibility for their actions. They insisted that parishioners alone will not be sent to jail and that in the future they will insist on joining their parishioners in jail.

Press as Cheerleader and Provocateur

18. (SBU) One of the biggest complaints of the local priests relates to the press and the falsehoods that they say have been printed in the state-controlled media. Since the demonstrations began again on August 14, daily reports in the local press (print, television and radio) have, in fact, been strongly critical of the actions of the Thai Ha parish and its parishioners. "Man on the street" interviews have featured neighbors complaining about the Thai Ha parish and Catholics complaining about the actions of the parish. The August 21 "Voice of Vietnam" went so far as to publish an editorial claiming that the actions of the parish priests run counter to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Comment: It's Just Another Brick in the Wall

19. (SBU) The action taken by parishioners in tearing down the brick wall on the disputed property seems to have given the government an opening to criticize the church and to intimidate the parishioners by criminalizing some of their actions. As evidenced by the high-level participation in today's press conference, local authorities are not backing down and may think that they now have

public opinion on their side in arresting some of the main instigators.

MICHALAK